



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas P. Morahan

## Providing for the Mental Health needs of Disaster Victims and their families

THOMAS P. MORAHAN January 19, 2010

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Last week I was appointed by the Senate Majority to Chair the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee, a post I held previously for a number of years. As I assume this role I am very well aware of a number of mental health priorities that need to be addressed in our state.

However, the recent earthquake that hit Haiti has required more immediate consideration. As thousands of hardworking Haitian families live in our state, with significant number of Haitians residing in Rockland County, this tragedy has had an enormous impact on their lives. I have spoken with a number of constituents on this tragedy, many of whom have sadly conveyed accounts from family and friends regarding the untold physical devastation, and flattening of much of the capital of Port-au-Prince. It is also very clear that the emotional trauma from this event is just beginning, and will be culminating in a period of mourning over the passing of loved ones.

The psychological effects of the disaster will clearly be devastating, and will likely persist long after the aftershocks have subsided. This mental health crisis will severely impact the people in Haiti, as well as Haitians who live in our state, who watch events daily unfold on TV. I have been in close touch with the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Mental Health, Dr. Michael F. Hogan, who has assured me that our state is moving with all deliberate speed to assist with critical mental health services and support. I have also been told that the Office of Mental Health is actively participating in mental health taskforces to directly assist victims around the state. Under the auspices of the Office of Mental Health, a mental health disaster team based at Rockland Psychiatric Center remains on alert. The team is made up of mental health professionals who have been trained to work as a crisis response unit to deal with the emotional aftermath of disasters. According to the commissioner, they “are on alert and prepared to assist in any way needed, and will respond when called.”

A mental health hotline has been set up to help individuals with mental health disaster-related issues. The number is 1-800-LIFENET. In Rockland County, a dedicated hotline has also been activated to provide counseling for those trying to cope with the effects of this disaster. One can call (845) 364-2216 to get assistance from mental health professionals.

Haiti remains place of unrelenting misery, but astonishing resilience. Time and again, Haitians have worked hard to rebuild their homes in the wake of unimaginable destruction. It is my hope and expectation that once again, with the assistance of caring New Yorkers, the Haitian community will slowly but surely heal from this terrible tragedy.

National Institute of Mental Health